Growing up girl in the 'hood: Vulnerability, violence and the girl-gang state of mind in *Bande de Filles/Girlhood* (Sciamma, France, 2014)[1]

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Introduction

This chapter explores the dynamics of vulnerability, violence and relatedness at work in the psychological development of Marieme/Vic (Karidja Touré), the protagonist of Céline Sciamma's *Bande de Filles/Girlhood*. Drawing initially on psychoanalytic notions of 'the girl-gang state of mind' articulated in the work of Donald Meltzer (1973), and on Luce Irigaray's concept of *parler femme* (speaking [as] woman) (1977/1985), it argues that dimensions of 'unspeakable' feminine experience are brought to life on the cinema screen for viewers as 'gestures of girlhood'. In order to consider the thematic significance of discourses of 'race' that surround the film, this chapter also turns to Black feminist theory to reflect on what it means to view it (and to write about it) from a position inscribed in white privilege. The methodological implications for intersectional scholarship are addressed in the next section and provide an important frame of reference for the discussion that follows.

Girlhood is a coming of age film that focuses on the experiences of its protagonist, Marieme, who lives in a *banlieue* on the outskirts of Paris. The film was written and directed by Céline Sciamma, a white woman with a track record of festival success for her earlier films, *Water Lilies* (France, 2007) and *Tomboy* (France, 2011). *Girlhood* has enjoyed widespread critical acclaim, but there has also been important commentary on Sciamma's decision to focus the story on a young Black woman, and on the film's sometimes troubling tendency toward 'cultural appropriation'[2] and the associated legacy of white liberal guilt (Blay 2015; Chew-Bose 2015; Tewolde-Berhan 2015). Media coverage has highlighted the casting decisions made by Sciamma, who selected non-professional actors for lead roles

having scouted them in public places. Sciamma and the four key female actors in the film reportedly lived together for three weeks while shooting the film to deepen their collaboration (Anonymous 2015a). As Agnieszka Piotrowska's reflexive account of historical inter-cultural collaborations and her film practice in Zimbabwe indicates, seeking to conscientiously overturn the legacies of colonial power and history through encounter, entanglement, and collaborative creativity constitutes a '"minor" political gesture' (2017: 166), albeit the case that ethical questions nevertheless persist: it is a start. A feminist perspective on Sciamma's motivations must keep this intentionality in mind, despite the obvious limitations.

The formative experiences of girlhood as depicted in Sciamma's film are written on and through the body, paying particular attention to raced and classed facets of experience. I argue that the film's evocation of the highs and lows of adolescent experience – and its phased fantasies of binding, splitting, and competition – offers a compelling commentary on the close imbrication of lived experience, cultural politics, identity and growth. Overall, I make the case that the film offers a timely opportunity for exploring the emotional work entailed in growing up for girls seeking survival in complex socio-cultural and political environments, where the inflections of intersectional experience are often contradictory. However, I also suggest that a psycho-cultural approach to questions of cinematic representation enables new ways of thinking about reflexive feminist practice, provoking consideration of the ethical and methodological responsibilities linked to scholarship that maps the contemporary cultural terrain of intersectional femininity.

Ethical considerations

In her work on *Precious* (Lee Daniels, US, 2010), Katariina Kyröla notes with sensitivity the difficulties involved for white scholars who are interested in discussing the cultural politics of 'race' and ethnicity: 'How we see ourselves (and others) as ethical subjects relates intimately

to not only how we feel about things, but to how we feel we *should* feel about things, and to how we express, articulate and intellectually process those feelings' (2017: 2).[3] Highlighting the crucial significance of bell hooks's work on 'learned helplessness' (2003: 26), Kyröla cautions against 'a white liberal attitude towards racism which, despite acknowledging racist structures and one's own privilege enabled by them, helps keep whiteness and white (bad) feeling in the center' (2017: 2). This resonates with Reni Eddo-Lodge's observation 'that, at first, talking about race is uncomfortable, because too many white people are angry and in denial. (…) [A]fter white people begin to get it, it's even more uncomfortable for them to think about how their whiteness has silently aided them in life' (2017: loc. 2432). It thus becomes urgent for white scholars to reflect on how best to 'own' their part in the oppressive regime of structural racism, and to consider how it might be possible to contribute to undoing its insidious dynamics – strategic, reflexive, conscientious interventions can contribute towards this project.

One means of beginning to do such work involves reflexive scholarly practice that is grounded in and informed by Black scholarship and its various commentaries on the ontological and epistemological failures and silences of unthinkingly white theory. In aiming to explore unspeakable dimensions of identity and experience as represented in mainstream cinema culture, this chapter therefore attempts to understand how meaning is made and interpreted through the mechanisms of film. To do this, it takes an object relations psychoanalytic approach to the psychological and emotional processes at work, but this is underpinned with feminist intentionality. To this end, I reflect on how previous methodological practices I have used to explore the cinematic treatment of femininity (Bainbridge 2008) can be deepened and made more politically conscious by foregrounding Black feminist scholarship on theory, identity and politics. My aim here is to write more reflexively about the racialized, sexualized and gendered dimensions of power and ideology,

whilst at the same time attempting to resist the pull into a 'well-meaning but guilty-feeling white liberal' mentality (Eddo-Lodge 2017: loc. 1601).

This seems all the more crucial given the production context of *Girlhood*. As noted above, its director is a successful white woman who benefits from very considerable cultural and ideological capital. In exercising this capital to make a film about young Black women, Sciamma manages to occupy a paradoxical and problematic relationship to power. On the one hand, as many critics have pointed out, in making a film in which the lead roles are played by four Black females, Sciamma innovates and challenges commonplace industrial practices and assumptions. However, she is able to do this, in part, *because* of her white privilege, and the notion of empowerment through patronage is unpalatable and discursively troubling despite the generally positive critical acclaim garnered by the film, which must, of course also be understood in terms of Sciamma's ability and talent. What is more, Sciamma also chose to recruit non-professional actors through a process of scouting, and there are uncomfortable connotations here around the use of cultural capital to enable aspirational shifts for the four young women selected in this way. For instance, blogger, Fanta Sylla, has suggested that Sciamma's choices are indicative of and resound with debates about 'the fallacy of solidarity' between women of colour, criticizing *Bande de filles* for its ostensibly universal representation of girlhood, without paying attention to the subtleties of distinction between women of colour (2015). Sylla argues that 'Sciamma didn't have the experience, the imagination, the vision and empathy necessary to represent this girlhood in its complexity. If the film were a radical exploration of Black French girlhood in the *banlieue*, watching it would have been a novel, disturbing and alienating experience' (ibid.); Sylla's point here is that this was not the case for her (and therefore, presumably, for others). Other Black critics have hailed the film for providing a compelling narrative in 'a movie landscape where there are so few depictions of Black girls getting to be Black girls' (Blay 2014), and describe the

film as ‘uplifting’ in its choice ‘to explore the bond between the girls, the power and confidence that they develop in their tight-knit group and how they support each other through their shared difficulties’ (Anonymous 2015b).

The complexity of the production context demands much wider interrogation and goes beyond the remit of this chapter. However, the range of discursive positions and critical responses it evokes is indicative of apparently unspeakable dimensions of lived experience for Black women, and this is the focus of my essay. In the discussion that follows, I explore how Sciamma’s film succeeds in opening up space in which to notice the dynamics of power at work in the film, inviting critical reflection about its subject matter. Later, I will reflect further on what such analysis means for thinking through the psychological processes involved in the power relations that are in play, by deploying the image of ‘the girl-gang state of mind’ as one that becomes useful in shaping a collaborative mode of solidarity between women that pays on-going attention to structural and ideological forces.

Analysis

With all of this in mind, then, how might we make sense of the schema of adolescent Black femininity depicted in *Girlhood*? To think about this, we need to note several important elements of the film and its construction of both Marieme/Vic and her friends in terms of simultaneously split and bound experience, vulnerability and violence, dependence and defiance. What seems to be at stake are aspects of subjective experience that are communicable despite being unspeakable, writ large on the screen in deeply affective ways. In my work over a number of years now (Bainbridge 2008; 2014), I have argued that film provides a cultural arena in which to explore such experience, with a view to re-visiting our understanding of the containing dynamics of cinema and its power to allow us to work through complex, and often contradictory, emotional and psychological experience.

Sciamma's film offers a fascinating evocation of these ideas in its invitation to grapple with the conundrum of subjectivity as experienced by young, Black, working class women whose lives are shaped by institutional and ideological forces beyond their control. As Claire Mouflard has observed,

> In Sciamma's *banlieue*, teenage girls are constantly renegotiating their home and public life in accordance with gender and economic roles that appear to be culturally formatted by the state and conveyed to them both through the institutions and through the male figures in their lives … [inscribing them in] geographical, economic and social alienation. (2016: 113)

The film immediately invokes the lived experience of the constraints described by Mouflard in its depiction of the sharp contrast between the vibrant, chatter-laden freedom experienced by the girls on the football field and immediately outside the stadium and its rapid silencing on their entrance into the walkways of the *banlieue*, where masculinity dominates, as young men stare from top steps and elevated walls at the approaching group of young women, looming over the girls' shared sociality with a palpable sense of foreboding. The young women navigate their way through high-rise landscape of home, and the lighting design of this sequence, with its emphasis on tall shadows and backlit silhouettes of seemingly faceless young men, hints at the oppressive atmosphere coded in the disparity of access to power between the young men and women who live there.[4] This also sets the scene for the atmosphere of Marieme's home in a fatherless family with a largely absent mother, an abusive older brother, and caring responsibilities for two younger sisters. That Marieme's emotional experience is unspeakable is shown clearly in the scene where she meets with an unseen educational counsellor who advises her that she is to be displaced against her will into

a vocational tier of education, rather than being allowed to progress to high school. High school was her best chance of escaping the tyranny of a future that will require repetition of her mother's experience and a lack of choice about this no matter how strongly she might resist. Marieme cannot put this into words, although her pain is clear as we listen to the counsellor's disembodied voice thwarting her ambition and glossing over a fleeting opportunity to ask questions that might afford an opportunity to think differently about Marieme's future. It is this experience, alongside her burgeoning desire for her brother's friend, Ismaël (Idrissa Diabaté), that pushes Marieme into her transformational experience with Lady's (Assa Sylla) gang, an experience that enables her to explore both sides of the togetherness/splitting binary evoked in the opening sequences of the film and, I will argue, to discover that Black femininity is construed as a seemingly endless source of struggle that demands a disruptive relationship to hegemonic structures of subjectivity.

Binding and splitting in the girl-gang state of mind

In his account of 'the seething flux' of adolescence, Donald Meltzer presents the adolescent world as a social structure, stating that its inhabitants are 'the happy-unhappy multitude caught up betwixt the "unsettling" of their latency period and the "settling" into adult life' (1973: 51). Tracing pathways through adolescent development, Meltzer spells out very clearly that the journey is one from splitting to integration, albeit that the journey is not a smooth one, involving wild periods of instability. For the adolescent subject, the group becomes a crucial place of experience, providing what he describes as 'a holding position in relation to splitting processes'. Gradually, through the process of 'disseminating parts of the self into members of the group', social processes are set in motion, enabling a shift from the persecutory and omnipotent terrors of the paranoid-schizoid psychological terrain of experience into the depressive arena of adulthood and the achievements fostered by it (ibid.:

54-5). However, as Hamish Canham observes, the problem with groups is that, in the contexts of any sense of perceived or real threat, they exert a very strong pull toward regressive infantile states of persistent anxiety, and where this is sustained, the 'lure of the gang' becomes inescapable. For the gang 'promises a life without many of the pains that recognizing difference, dependency, the inevitability of death, and vulnerability entails' (2002: 113-14).

Of course, the question of difference in this discussion by Canham is not coded with any specific reference to gender, sexuality or ethnicity, and we need to read further to understand how the state of mind at work in gangs is 'used as a solution to the pains involved in having ambivalent feelings' as Canham argues, following Herbert Rosenfeld (1971 cited in Canham 2002: 116). Eventually, Meltzer returns to the theme of the gang, to explore the different textures of gang-related experience. Specifically, he formulates the idea of a 'girl-gang state of mind', in which the struggle for 'egalitarianism' is grounded in a refusal of the authority of the father, creating what Meltzer describes as its 'anti-masculine, Amazonian quality … [in which] … the myth of feminine inferiority is vigorously denied, and yet its remnants seem affirmed by this very vigour' (2007: 447). Meltzer links this to 'the injustice of the social order where femininity is not in itself obviously valued' (ibid.: 445), observing that this leads to girls being 'strongly inclined to feel that only other girl-women can understand [the] dread [that this entails]' (ibid.: 446). In this way, then, the girl-gang state of mind simultaneously binds girls to one another, creating a form of shared sociality, while also paradoxically permitting them to express an ambivalent, schizoid mentality linked to the impossibility of their experience. These themes must surely be intensified for women of colour, and even more so for *young* women of colour who are also from underprivileged socio-economic/classed backgrounds. All of this is, I think, starkly on show in *Girlhood*, a film that therefore offers an important opportunity to consider the symbolic enactments at

work in the story and the way that these articulate more usually unspoken dimensions of political and social experience.

The film narrative makes use of various tropes of splitting and binding to express the complexity of this inscription of identity. The importance of binding experience in adolescence accounts for the formation of gangs in the first place. It is no accident here that Marieme is seduced into Lady's gang shortly after learning that her education is to be abruptly re-directed into vocational training. The prospect of this is unbearable for her, and she sees the scope for rebellion and possible freedom in Lady's offer to join her gang. She negotiates her entry into the group by means of binding experiences linked to clothing, music, petty theft, dance, and aggression, which is expressed toward rival girl gangs on 'the other side of the tracks' as well as in Marieme's bullying of a younger schoolgirl for money. Marieme is finally 'inducted' officially into the gang when Lady gives her the gift of a necklace announcing her gang name, 'Vic – for *victoire*', and offers a piece of advice that will shape the rest of Marieme's journey in the film: 'Do what you want'.

The gift of the necklace and of the alternate name/gang moniker, 'Vic – for *victoire*', also underscores the role of splitting in gang culture. Marieme has to continue to be the Marieme of her family life (caring for sisters, protecting them from an abusive brother, feeding them, washing up, and deflecting all of the violent atmosphere of the family home onto herself). However, she is now also Vic, a young woman who dares to transgress, who shares unparalleled moments of joy with her gang mates when they closet themselves away in hotel rooms with cheap alcohol and marijuana, fleetingly escaping the pain of their everyday lives. Yet the split persona also invites envious rivalry and competition, enacted through both costume – Marieme's outfits often match those of Lady in ways that those of Adiatou (Lindsay Karimoh) and Fily (Mariétou Touré) do not – and when Lady gets 'wasted' (i.e. beaten up) by the leader of a rival gang, an act that will be avenged by Vic, who takes a

kitchen knife to the fight, cuts off her rival's bra and keeps it as a trophy. Of course, this induces painful competition between Vic and Lady, who is even more symbolically stripped of her authority thanks to her father cutting off her hair in punishment for the beating she took in the original fight. The overtones of struggle with and for phallic iterations of femininity in these sequences of violence deepen our sense that, for these young women, growing up girl in the 'hood is far from straightforward. Engaging in violent fights involving knives and the symbolic loss of long hair connotes the ways in which the violent residue of unspeakable intersectional experience struggles to find a cultural outlet, highlighting the familiar ways in which violence, that is more usually ascribed to masculinity, provides temporary respite for young women struggling to assert power. The masquerade of phallic femininity is palpable here. The resonances with debates about solidarity between feminists, and between women of colour and white women, also reverberate here, as the challenges around finding a means of political expression for both the individual and group experiences of women become overlaid with structures of dangerous competition and rivalry.

The film shows how young, Black, working class, female experience simply cannot adequately be encoded. The matrix of overlaid schemas of difference is represented as impossibly complex, showing how the failures and silences of the hegemonic ideological value system cannot only be brought to light but also how they might be mined for clues to the texture of what goes unspoken. It is worth reiterating Canham's observations here: on the one hand, the gang 'promises a life without any of the pains that recognizing difference … entails' (2002: 113). However, 'when deprivation is coupled with abuse, it often leads … to a defensive internal manoeuvre designed to distance the ego from the pain of what it has been through' (ibid.: 125). In its evocation of these very dilemmas, *Girlhood* offers what I think of as 'gestures of girlhood' in its play with what Richard Billow has characterized as a kind of striving for mutual recognition that takes place in gangs (2013: 141). Psychologically, this is

an attempt to establish what he describes as 'subject-to-subject relationships', and this, in turn, is a means of aspiring to an intrapsychic state that allows for the democratic integration of interpersonal and political or ideological experience. In *Girlhood*, this striving underpins some of the most emotive and affective scenes of binding between the members of Lady's gang, expressed through an embodied gestural politics that is echoed in Sciamma's cinematic style.

Gestures of girlhood

In her work on the psychoanalytic setting, psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray explores the importance of gesture for communicating often dramatic dimensions of gendered subjectivity. Discussing the experience of the girl that goes unspoken in Freud's (1920) account of the *fort-da* game, Irigaray asserts that for the girl, gesture is also about staging and managing the psychic loss of the mother, which, she argues, is complicated for the girl-child because of their shared gendered experience, and because 'the mother always remains too familiar and too close' (1987/1993: 98). For Irigaray, the importance of gesture is that it allows girls to express and to explore aspects of their experience that are *not* inscribed in difference, but, which rather depend on shared aspects of subjectivity in common. Reflecting on her experience of young women in the analytic setting, Irigaray suggests that the repertoire of such gestures includes whirling around in dance to signify abandonment (in both senses) and to attract recognition (ibid.: 97-8).

Irigaray's insight here shows how girls' experience can be articulated despite all the seeming prohibitions. This provides an interesting lens through which to read one of the best-known sequences in *Girlhood*, the scene in which Lady's gang clubs together to pay for a night in a hotel room, where they drink, get high, and dance together to Rhianna's song, 'Diamonds' (2012). This is a scene in which the sheer joy of the girls' shared 'subject-to-

subject' relationship dominates the mood of the film, eliding all the vulnerability and violence that encodes their experience of the walkways and stairwells of the *banlieue,* the domestic sphere, the exploitative workplace, and the underground spaces of metro shopping malls and train tracks.

There are two notable stylistic aspects of this sequence that reveal how Sciamma uses not only narrative to explore experience but also the formal structures of cinema. Firstly, the lighting design of the sequence has received critical acclaim for its achievement in successfully lighting Black skin for the screen (Ince 2017; McNeill 2017).[5] In what Kate Ince refers to as 'an aesthetic of melancholy' (2017: 171), the sequence emphasizes the blue-black tones of both the actors' skin colour and their costumes. The aesthetic here does, indeed, connote melancholy, as Ince suggests, but I think it goes deeper than this. It also evokes the bruising experience of the lives of these young women, tinged as they are with violence and pain, both embodied and psychological.[6] The pain of their psychological experience stands in counterpoint to the embodied joy of their dancing together, suggesting something of the paradoxical and deeply complex signifier of the bruise, a mark on the body that bears witness to violent experience and that can bring the associated pain to life again through either the lightest accidental touch against an external object or through a self-harming, conscious prodding by one's own volition. The lingering, crushing effects of embodied and psychological experience are connoted here in the bruised aesthetic, adding to the paradoxically melancholic tone of this scene of apparent joy and speaking directly to the emotional complexity of the narrative as a whole.

Paradox is also at work in the second formal strategy I want to discuss here: the sound design of the scene. By overlaying Rhianna's original track onto the footage of the girls singing along, Sciamma effectively makes the music both diegetic and non-diegetic at the same time – for the first . The girls are both singing along (as we hear at the end of the scene)

and apparently lip-syncing at the same time, thanks to the strategies of cinema.[7] This is a fascinating cinematic technique that simultaneously *disrupts* and *forges* identificatory processes. It heightens awareness of the distance necessary for us to feel ourselves to be *viewers* of the film, while also touching us, and speaking to our own real word experience, in which Rhianna's song resonates with our own mnemic associations and, as discussed by Isabella McNeill (2017), with those evoked by Rhianna's personal stories of traumatic experience. The girls sing whilst not being heard whilst ventriloquizing – they invoke what we might think of as a karaoke rendition of gender, a performance that both embodies the possibilities of Black femininity and pushes at its boundaries, evoking the poignant search for a voice that such unspoken experience entails. Of course, in this scene, the girls also sing in a different language, suggesting that difference is experienced as another language, one that is not 'known' but can nevertheless be sung through mimetic ventriloquism and performance. Like girls in a gang, then, as viewers we are both bound to the protagonists (and to one another) and divorced/separated at the same time, and this in enacted in the simultaneous use of Rhianna's song on the soundtrack and within the diegetic space of the narrative, mirroring the impossible, contradictory pulls exerted on female subjectivities inscribed in difference. There is also a palpable dimension of me/not me experience for the viewer here that resonates with Kimberlyn Leary's assertion that 'race, like gender, exists in transitional space. It is located in the tensions among biological distinction, sociocultural fact, and future possibilities' (1997: 63). While Leary herself does not refer to Winnicott here, his work nevertheless comes to mind. Winnicott's (1971) emphasis on the use of transitional me/not-me objects to negotiate separation from the mother in pursuit of a sense of mastery in the adult world speaks to the complex entanglement of embodied experience with psychological and emotional aspects of selfhood, as well as with broader sociocultural pressures and dynamics. Leary's observation can be deepened by thinking with Winnicott here. For

Winnicott, feelings of mastery are closely tied to the sensory pleasures of the object, the kinds of pleasure writ large on the screen in this sequence of Sciamma's film, as we watch the sheer unbridled joy of experience manifest itself in terms of close bodily proximity, dancing with arms conjoined and so on. The affective qualities of this scene are deeply emotional, encouraging the introjection of a sense of the fleeting, binding sociality expressed within the group at this moment.

There are parallels, too, with the call made by Irigaray to establish what she describes as *parler femme* or 'speaking (as) woman' in order to articulate aspects of feminine subjectivity that more usually go unspoken (1977/1985: 135). The terrain of *parler femme* is grounded in horizontal female relationships of sociality rather than occupying spaces of inheritance between generations. In *Girlhood,* the sequences involving dancing and singing are encoded in just such terms, showing how musical subcultures permit young women to find points of connection and commonality, when so much of the world cuts off any vision of their experience. Irigaray's notion of *parler femme* is useful here insofar as it enables us to perceive how aspects of the feminine can be made explicit through cinematic strategies linked to gesture, embodiment, *mise-en-scène,* sound design and so on. The problem with Irigaray's work, however, is that it insists on maintaining a hierarchy of modes of difference in which gender is elevated about all other forms of experience. This means that, despite the assertions that I have made here and elsewhere (Bainbridge 2008), about the strategic value of working with Irigaray's logic, and despite the fact that the notion of *parler femme* opens up ways of viewing cinema that extract and exemplify how the feminine can indeed be put on show, it is nevertheless crucial to acknowledge that the strategic value of such an approach is limited because of the Irigarayan refusal to grapple with concepts of race and ethnicity. This insight is an important element of the work involved in this chapter, as I seek to reflect on my own methodological practices. I will return to this discussion below.

The gestures of girlhood in Sciamma's film go beyond the simple expression of binding experience expressed in and through the notion of *parler femme*. The limitations of ideological notions of femininity, and its raced and classed iterations often dominate the screen. We might think of the way a dominant hermeneutics of suspicion that surrounds young Black women is evoked in the shopping mall scene, for example, when a young White shop assistant indiscreetly follows Marieme as she browses the merchandise, or of the many different kinds of outfit, style and look tried on by Marieme/Vic as the film evolves. We variously see her wearing an American football kit, simple leisure wear and trainers, a tight-fitting, glamourous (stolen) dress, a leather jacket, and, in later scenes, a high end dress and platinum blonde wig as she plays the role of drug dealer, and, later still, in scenes that show a distinct effort to erase all features of femininity, by binding her breasts and wearing loose-fitting sportswear with cornrow braids to give the illusion of short hair. Sciamma's visual and narrative strategies reveal the claustrophobic spaces of Black femininity but also open them up for scrutiny, throwing them into question. In the play with costume, for example, it is as though Marieme is experimenting at the margins of femininity, trying on guises of female subjectivity, trying to work out whether it might suit her or not. The sheer array of identity modes conjured in this dressing-up play can be read as a kind of refusal, an exposé of the constructedness of female identity and its lack of fit for young Black women of her background. The distinction drawn by Irigaray between masquerade and mimesis is instructive here (1977/1985: 220), and we might read Marieme as a purveyor of mimetic challenges to a set of ideological codes of femininity that exclude her on the grounds of ethnicity and social class.[8] Homi Bhabha's observation that mimicry in inscribed in ambivalence and therefore produces its excesses, slippages and differences at every turn is also important here (1994: 85).

However, there is an important difficulty in turning to Irigaray to grapple with the silences of the feminine inscribed in raced (and classed) difference. She has notoriously suggested that 'sexual difference is an immediate natural given. The whole of human kind is composed of women and men and of nothing else. The problem of race is in fact a secondary problem' (1992/1996: 47). Here, as Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo observes, Irigaray's ontology 'relegates race to a subordinate position vis-à-vis sexual difference', thereby positing 'sexual difference as unmarked by race' (2007: 55-7). As she goes on to argue, for women of colour, race is much more likely to be an organizing category of experience, and so the shameful politics of white liberal theory are exposed here. This observation is central to my attempt (and, indeed, to those of many other feminist scholars including, for example, Piotrowska, [2017] and Ranjana Khanna [2003]) to move beyond the structuring absences of Irigarayan philosophy. As Bloodsworth-Lugo shows, it is imperative to bring into view the absent, structurally invisible dimensions of Black femininity, so that they become present despite the seeming impossibility of this.

I am reminded here of Bion's appropriation of Freud's imagery in a translation he made of a letter written by Freud to Lou Andreas Salomé: 'when conducting an analysis, one must cast a beam of intense darkness so that something that has hitherto been obscured by the glare of the illumination can glitter all the more in the darkness' (Grotstein 2007: 12). Sciamma's film works, I think, to do just this, so that we insinuate ourselves into the gaps opened up by the filmic strategies and start to comprehend the depth of silence enshrined within them. The claustrophobia of this experience is evoked in Sciamma's periodic use of cuts to black screen during the film so that the blackness resonates for the viewer at turning points in the plot. In the institutional space of the cinema, this technique deepens the darkness of the viewing environment for the spectator, and all the while foregrounding the importance of cinematic specificity, in a way that once again resonates with Bion's words. The

oppressive, inescapable atmosphere invoked in these lingering moments perhaps translate a tiny part of the lived psychological experience of the subjectivity of our protagonists, showing how all iterations of performative identity become oppressive and thwarting in the end. We become shrouded in the unenveloped dereliction of subjectivity here, understanding how and why this experience simply cannot be spoken. This also provides valuable insight into how and why the girl-gang state of mind can provide much needed respite from the affective provocations inherent in the struggle to become both Black and feminine. There is an endless pursuit of fixity in a relay between embodied dimensions of identity that plays out psychologically and mires the subject in a logic of endless splitting, so that the apparent safety of feeling bound to others provides a degree of certainty at least, until the binding itself also becomes claustrophobic and unbearable as the individual is reduced to the whole, becoming unable to shake off the sense of the gang as an aspect of self experience that diminishes a sense of individual subjectivity while paradoxically seeming to provide a route toward it. Marieme's struggle with this leads her to abandon her binding to the girl-gang as she strikes out in pursuit of life on her own terms, albeit the case that she needs to tread a path of criminality and obedience to men to get there. This section of the film opens up new perspectives on Marieme's struggle to discover herself as a subject.

Marieme goes to work for Abou (Djibril Gueye), an older man who runs a drug dealing gang, and who offers Marieme safety at least from the abusive relationship with her brother as well as space to live in what might feel like an independent existence in a flat in another *banlieue* that she shares with other members of Abou's gang. She has her own Playstation, a mattress on the floor, a kitchen to cook in, a friend (Monica), and her on-going love relationship with Ismaël. Marieme lives as Vic in this segment of the film, abandoning her familial relations completely and 'parking' her former life in doing so. She no longer wears stylish dresses unless she is on her way to work, when she also puts on a platinum

blonde wig that allows us to pick her out as a mimetic paradox as she moves through a party scene populated with rich white people in the heart of Paris in order to deliver drugs. On her own time, Vic wears baggy sports clothing and cornrow braids, and she hangs out with the guys from the gang, joining in as they intimidate young girls. She cooks eggs for Monica (Dielika Coulibaly), and they exchange mutual criticism as they talk about their choices of 'look'. For Vic, Monica's conformity to the stereotype of the drug gangster's 'ho' traps her in a code of behaviour that Vic herself refuses. For Monica, meanwhile, there is puzzlement about why Vic looks as though she is trying to 'pass' as a man. This is, of course, to an extent, an effort to ward off unwanted sexual approaches from her fellow gang members and her boss, but we see that Vic pushes this to extremes, binding her breasts so that she looks even less womanly – a choice that leads her to fight with Ismaël, and, eventually, to refuse his offer of marriage as solution to her dilemmas and then to break up with him. Vic goes to a party with her crew, and toys briefly with desire for Monica as they dance close together and explore the frisson between them. This scene is rudely interrupted by Abou, who tries to force Vic to kiss him in a scene of devastating reinforcement of all that she has come to fear about the world: for Vic, men appear to impose their sexual expectations upon her, policing her preferences around her embodied identity, and stripping her of any freedom of choice when it comes to sexual relationships.

What we see here is an extension of the play with identity and iterations of gender and difference in ways that move beyond the confines of heterosexual formations of femininity. Vic actively subverts the bodily codes of her gendered identity, toying with the release provided by inhabiting what Halberstam[9] refers to as 'female masculinity' in scenes that can also be read as an attempt to insinuate herself into the spaces of masculine experience so as to explore exactly what it is that she is being refused access to (1998). Vic places herself in the

in-between spaces of experimentation, hyper-performativity and transformation in ways that thus articulate identity as queer, as I shall now briefly explore.

Breaking the frame

In their work on female masculinity, Halberstam has argued that 'the categories available to women for racial, gendered and sexual identity are simply inadequate' (1998: 7). Halberstam also highlights the significance of naming in their work, showing how it articulates 'the power of definition' (ibid.: 7); when names are changed, the power to reimagine identity is conferred on the individual, allowing a retreat from lived facets of identity, place, relationships and even gender. For Halberstam, this constructs 'a queer subject position' from which it is possible to challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity (ibid.: 9). It is easy to see how *Girlhood* puts this dynamic on show in its construction of Vic (who, at the same time, both is and is not Marieme) in the final segment of its story. What would it mean, then, to think of *Girlhood* as offering a queer representation of identity in order to highlight the politics of intersectional subjectivity?

Laura Alexandra Harris argued some time ago that working toward 'queer Black feminism' can 'disrupt the silences in feminism, Black feminism, and queer theories of race, class, and sexuality' (1996: 4), thereby opening up the intersection of sexual pleasure and the politics of race and class. As she suggests

> A queer Black feminist practice requires marking race and class in relation to desire and reveals that the telling of desire must always be a text written about race and class no matter how encoded with gender oppression … race and class [are] inextricable from … sexuality and feminist consciousness. (ibid.: 12-13)

If we follow Harris's logic here, we might make interesting links to the importance of gang experiences for young women of colour. Meda Chesney-Lind and Katherine Irwin have observed that, while gang culture places girls in precarious positions because they do not have access to legitimate or illegitimate economic opportunities, it also enables girls to confront the hyper-masculine norms of ideology that surround them (2004: 49). Debbie Weeks has carried out research to show that because of the close imbrication of Black identities with sexualized connotations in the popular cultural imagination, young Black women are subjected to intensely sexualized othering in everyday life, leading to a great difficulty in finding space in which to explore their sexual identities because of the tension between deviance and hypersexuality in which their identities are construed (Weeks 2002: 252; 2004: 144-5). In this way, then, young Black women find themselves being interpellated as what Halberstam refers to as 'in-betweenness' (2004: 210), a trope that resonates with the struggle portrayed by Marieme/Vic in *Girlhood*, and that also reminds us of the double bind alluded to by Meltzer in his observations about the girl-gang state of mind and its evocation of femininity as paradoxically re-inscribed or trapped within the logic of patriarchy despite (because of?) its anti-masculine texture. Kimberley Roberts has shown how liminal figures of this type reveal the potential for the cultural subversion of gender norms (2002: 223, 230), and, for me, the institutional, figurative and imaginative spaces of cinema provide exactly the kind of containing environment needed for such apparently dangerous or difficult forays to be made. When we see on the cinema screen a girl protagonist who seemingly has no resources left to her, and no place to go, the audience is also left, I think, in a space of wondering, or perhaps in a state of being able to explore what Christopher Bollas describes as 'unthought knowns' (1987: 4): this is, at least, my own experience of this film. The film offers space in which to think outside the frame of conventional practices of representation of gender and sexuality, in a way that is possible because of the containing function that cinema can have

when it provides spaces for the experience and expression of emotion that lies beyond the scope of normal/conscious thinking processes.

For me, this strain of thinking offers a crucial lens through which to read the final scenes of *Girlhood*. Marieme returns fleetingly to the *banlieue*, ringing the buzzer to her family home but finding herself unable to speak when her sister asks who is there. She turns and stares at the view across Paris, bathed in sunshine and she leans against a pillar, crying. Her grief and sorrow speak volumes about her isolation in this moment, her desperate need to cut herself off completely in order to find freedom. The camera tracks in behind her, before zooming in on a strangely blurred shot of the distant cityscape, excluding Marieme from the frame for a moment, and connoting a closing shot. Suddenly Marieme rushes into view, crossing the frame from right to left. She pauses for a moment in a profile shot, placing herself as the object of focus, before running out of shot again. Her movement from one side of the frame to the other both speaks her inscription in the margins of representability, and gives voice to her struggle in the in-between spaces of representation in a way that feels full of life and hope

Cinema itself is queered in this moment, as Marieme undoes its logic, highlighting the 'off-screen' spaces of her identity and giving the spectator room to acknowledge these. Her flight into the unknown on her own terms becomes a site of cumulative learning, and one that is ripe with possibility. The bruised aesthetic that accentuated Marieme's vulnerability and her encounters with violence lifts in this scene to allow sunlight into the frame. The score consists of a track entitled 'Where to go?', a question posed in the active voice, connoting subjecthood. The cinema becomes a space of rupture, gesturing in and through girlhood to the spaces that lie beyond the girl-gang state of mind, spaces existing outside dominant modes of subjectivity so that girlhood becomes readable as a learning experience, a maturational process that does not only trap its subjects into the schizoid pursuit of safety in

numbers (Waddell 2007: 202), but which can also lead to a profound capacity for resilience. In the words of Rhianna's lyric in the film's metonymic song, girlhood becomes 'a vision of ecstasy', 'alive', with a 'life inside [the] eyes' – like Marieme's future, we hope, it shines bright.

Conclusion

Writing twenty years ago, psychoanalyst, Kimberlyn Leary asked, 'In which ways are gender and race comparable?' (1997: 161). Following the logic of postmodern debates about the role of sexuate difference in shaping subjectivity, she concluded, as discussed above, that race and gender exist in transitional space and are conceptually inscribed in the tensions of biology, society, culture, and ideology (ibid.: 163). However, as Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn assert, the 'tinderbox' texture of intersectional debates about race and lower socioeconomic class inscriptions deepens a tendency toward the disparagement of working class subjects (2013: 142). We could go further and observe that, when these dimensions of lived identity are shot through with questions of gender and sexuality, the quality of disparagement takes on an especially bruising tone, a feeling which is conveyed through the *mise-en-scène* of *Girlhood*, and which also resonates with the struggle for Black feminist voices to be heard in a landscape of insistent colour-blindness.

Sciamma's film encapsulates the fundamental complexity evoked by Leary's efforts to grapple with the apparent impossibility of conceptualizing race and gender *at the same time* – or rather, more specifically, the apparent impossibility of achieving such a task when the subject in question is both Black *and* female. With its focus on the contradictory and impossible silences of Black adolescent femininity, it shows us the importance of what Wilfred Bion calls 'binding' (1965: 69), the principle by which aspects of experience are joined in constant conjunction, albeit that the meanings of each element might simply be

unknown. Meaning is accumulated by dint of this on-going conjunction, and I find this concept to be hugely interesting for thinking about what it is possible to say about Black femininity, a formation of identity that is laden with ontological complexity and psychological and sociocultural entanglements. As Patricia Collins has argued (1991/2000), Black female experience is situated within multiple intersecting sites of oppression, and these are not *additive* but rather *multiplicative* in texture.

Meltzer's notion of 'the girl-gang state of mind' provides a useful analogy for the dynamic that underpins the competing, schizoid logic of different modes of feminist scholarship. As his work on this topic makes clear, the value of grouping together is that it provides a means of surviving scenarios of impoverishment and attack by dint of forging bonds *in spite of* the odds against this. Meltzer asserts that the 'egalitarianism' in the girl-gang state of mind is linked to the social injustices of patriarchy and paradoxically allows women to bind themselves together while at the same time expressing ambivalence about doing so. This can be read as a gesture toward a temporary, strategic form of feminist politics aimed at uncovering the complex impossibilities of female intersectional experience. Perhaps this provides a way for us to comprehend the widespread critical appreciation of *Girlhood*, despite its challenging contexts of production, and to think anew about how the film invites us to think beyond familiar paradigms and to hold in tension the messy complexities of contemporary identity politics.

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[2] The notion of 'cultural appropriation' has now become commonplace in popular commentary on social processes around ethnicity, identity, and responsibility. Of course, the term is laden with assumptions, as well as a complex dynamic that is overlaid with textures of both guilt and reparative impulses. For a nuanced and deeply moving perspective on how the concept undermines efforts at collaborative learning and creativity, see Piotrowska, 2017. See also Sciamma's own reflections on her engagement with this issue in the course of making this work (Blay 2015).

[3] See also Piotrowska (2017) on how these issues are also interrogated in the genre of documentary filmmaking.

[4] Of course, the shadowy threat posed by the groups of young men in this scene fuels lazy cultural stereotypes about black masculinity, and this is a frequent criticism of cinema that focuses on black female experience.

[5] Emma Wilson notes a comment made by the film's Director of Photography, Crystel Fournier: 'We managed to do things we never could have done with white skins. The colour palette we used between blue and green can produce a gloomy effect and never enhances the actors. But our actresses, since their skin is warm, can handle these types of colours. We could push colours to a point impossible with white skins' (2017: 18).

[6] *Precious* has also been analysed extensively for its treatment of pain as a key dimension of Black female experience. See, for example, Ordoñez (2010); Griffin (2013); and Regester (2015). The significance of unknowable pain experienced by people of colour must also underpin reflexive scholarship conducted by those who benefit from white privilege.

[7] The majority of this sequence (2' 53") uses Rhianna's song as a non-diegetic soundtrack, depicting the girls as they seem to lip sync the words, before cutting to a 43" long passage in which the non-diegetic soundtrack matches the diegetic voices of the gang as they sing in their own voices.

[8] As I explain elsewhere: 'Masquerade is the term used to describe an alienated version of femininity which originates in a woman's awareness of a man's desire for her to be his other. The femininity of the masquerade is constructed by and for masculine desire, and thus does not allow woman to experience desire in her own right. Within masquerade, woman is permitted only to experience desire when man's desire permits (Irigaray 1977/1985: 220). (…) In mimicry, woman deliberately takes on the feminine style and posture attributed to her within dominant discourse in order to reveal the mechanisms of her oppression and exploitation (Irigaray 1977/1985: 220). Woman is then able to use these mechanisms to disrupt discursive coherence by deliberately taking on the role ascribed to the feminine to draw attention to the flimsiness of its construction within dominant discourse, and thus to seduce dominant discourse into revealing its repressed foundation' (Bainbridge 2008: 20).

[9] In an effort to respect Halberstam's position on the importance of preserving 'gender quandaries', I have opted here to omit their first names (Judith/Jack) and to use a gender-non-specific pronoun when discussing their work. As Halberstam observes, in order to be politically dynamic, pronoun use 'must categorically remain murky' (2012).